Special Education Debate

Based on state and federal statistics, minority students are not being over identified for Special Education, the students in Special Education have a lower dropout rate than the students in general education, and students in Special Education show growth towards closing their learning gap.

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Debaters

Natalie Bogg has 7 years experience in Special Education through teaching and/or being a job developer with the WorkAbility I Program. Natalie has earned a Master's Degree, General Education and Special Education Credentials, CLAD Certificate, and is married with 2 teenage daughters living at home. Natalie has completed the Con side, Pro Rebuttal, and Conclusion of this paper.

Vernette Hansen left business after 12 years to pursue a Master's degree in Special Education. She became interested in students with special needs after working for county schools as an instructional assistant. She felt these students could do much more than what was expected of them in academics, behavioral and life-skills management. She has worked for three years in a school setting running a Learning Center and providing support for regular education teachers. All Special Needs students in her school are in regular education classes most of the day. Vernette has completed the Introduction, Pro side, and Con Rebuttal of this paper.

Introduction

There are three controversial issues concerning Special Education and achievement. First is the concern that minority groups are over identified as Special Needs. The data indicates this may be occurring to some degree, but has lessened in the last few decades for some groups. Then there are the twin issues of closing the achievement gap between Special Education and regular education students and eventual high school graduation rates for Special Needs students. The new high school exit exam requirements heighten concerns of these issues.

In 2006, the California Department of Education issued a progress report showing statistics for sub-groups of Special Education students and progress in these areas. These groups are especially important to look at as we, educators, strive to meet the educational needs of students with challenges. We know we have succeeded legitimately in meeting those needs when we have proportionally represented sub-groups in Special Education, closed the learning gap between students with special needs and non-disabled students, and produced high school graduates from all sub-groups.

Pro Argument

Statistics show that Whites have the same percentages as the general population in Special Education identification. They also show the graduation rates for Whites identified with Special Needs is considerably above the state average for other challenged groups and higher than those not receiving services. Finally, we are closing the achievement gap for special needs students as evidenced by the graduation rate and standardized test scores.

A report issued by the California Department of Education in 2006 released statistics for 2004-2005 showing that approximately 10% of the overall student population is identified as Special Needs. If we were to maintain that there is no discrimination towards minorities through over-identification of Special Needs, then each minority sub-group would have close to10% of their population identified as Special Needs. The report indicated 9.8 % of Hispanics, 11% of Native American, 11.3% of Whites and 15% of African-Americans students receive Special Education Services. The other sub-group minorities are Filipino, Asian, and Pacific Islander, and these are under represented in Special Education by 5.0%, 5.2% and 7.6% respectively.

The statistics for this latter sub-group clearly demonstrate that not all minority sub-groups are over represented. Whites are identified more than Native Americans, and overall, Whites are over represented in Special Education by 1.3%. Only African Americans are disproportionately represented by a significant margin. No other sub-group significantly exceeds the state average.
In considering the statistics for Special Education and high school completion, another State Department of Education's report from the demographics office compared low income, English Language Learners, and Special Education dropout statistics. The dropout rate for Special Education students in the 2005-2006 school year was 8.6 %. In contrast, the dropout rate for ELL students was 33.7%, and the socioeconomically disadvantaged were alarmingly 44.2%. The average student with none of the above challenges has a dropout rate of 17%. Regular education students drop out at a rate twice that of special education students. The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition reports that the dropout rate for Special Needs students (other than those with emotional or behavioral conditions) is contingent on several variables not related to disability that also tend to effect the rate for non-disabled students. These factors include previous retention, socioeconomic situation, drug abuse, low parental involvement, etc. Therefore, other than emotional or behavioral disorders, disability is not the primary contributing factor in dropout rates.

Further indication that the achievement gap between regular education students and Special Education students is narrowing is evidenced by looking at the standardized testing from 2001-2005. Special Education students not only made growth in the 4 years of testing, but they scored 18% in 2001 and 22% in 2004 in the proficient range (CDE, 2006). This is remarkable considering that in order to be identified as a Special Education student, the disability must affect academic performance.

As encouraging as these statistics are, it is interesting to note that the most successful Special Education students are unaccounted for as they are the students who have overcome their disability such that they no longer need Special Education supports and have exited Special Education.

Con Argument

If minority students are considered as all racial/ethnic groups except for whites (non-Hispanic) then, according to the national statistics, minorities are being identified more often than whites for specific learning disabilities, developmental delay, hearing impairments, autism, deaf-blindness, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance. To support the above statement, the 27th Annual Report of Congress on the Implementation of the IDEA Act, 2005, was referenced for the percentage of the American population receiving special education and related services by race/ethnicity (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. The Percentage of Students Receiving Special Education for 2003

Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/Alaska Native	African American	White (non-Hispanic)	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander
Risk Index	13.8%	12.4%	8.7%	8.2%	4.5%

The report continues with risk ratios for 2003 comparing the proportion of a particular racial/ethnic group served under Part B to the proportion served among the other racial/ethnic groups combined. Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students were more likely to be served under Part B than all other racial/ethnic groups combined (1.5 times more likely); Asian Pacific Islander, Hispanic and white students were less likely to be served under Part B than all other racial/ethnic groups combined (0.5, 0.9, and 0.9 respectively). Additional statistics from the report were that American Indian/Alaska Native students were 1.8 times more likely to receive special education and related services for specific learning disabilities and 3.6 times more likely to receive special education and related services for developmental delay than all other racial/ethnic groups combined. Asian/Pacific Islander students were 1.2 times more likely to receive special education and related services for hearing impairments, autism and deaf-blindness than all other racial/ethnic groups combined. Black students were 3.0 times more likely to receive special education and related services for mental retardation and 2.3 times more likely to receive special education and related services for emotional disturbance than all other racial/ethnic groups combined. Hispanic students were 1.2 times more likely to receive special education and related services for hearing impairments and 1.1 times more likely to receive special education and related services for specific learning disabilities than all other racial/ethnic groups combined. White (non Hispanic) students were 1.6 times more likely to receive special education and related services for other health impairments than all other racial/ethnic groups combined.

The second part of this debate refers to dropout rate. Estimates from 2001 place the overall dropout rate for students without disabilities at 11 percent (Kemp, 2007). Another source, the 2006 Digest of Education Statistics, listed the 2003 national high school dropout rate for all racial/ethnic groups to be 9.9 percent (white was 6.3 percent, black was 10.9 percent and Hispanic was 23.5 percent). These two sources' data don't match, but they are fairly close in percentages. Switching focus to the national dropout rate of students ages 14 and older with disabilities, the 27th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, 2005, for the year 2002-2003, detailed the figure to be 34 percent. Checking figures from the 2006 Digest of Education Statistics, the dropout rate for all students with disabilities for that same year (2002-03) was 33.6 percent. The dropout rate was highest for American Indian/Alaska Native students with disabilities (48.4 percent); black (41.7 percent) and Hispanic (38.9 percent) students with disabilities had the second and third highest dropout rates. The dropout rate was

lowest for Asian/Pacific Islander (24.3 percent) and white (29.9 percent) students, both with disabilities. For students with emotional/behavioral disorders, the dropout rate has been between 50% and 59%, while between 32% and 36% of students with learning disabilities drop out of school (Kemp, 2006). Comparing the national figures from these two resources (34% and 33.6%) for all students with disabilities, to the 11% and 9.9% of all students without disabilities, the conclusion seems fairly obvious. Students with disabilities had a higher dropout rate than students without disabilities. Lastly, as students with disabilities progress toward the secondary level in our national school system, they show less and less growth towards closing the learning (academic performance) gap.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law has provided a spotlight on the academic performance of poor and minority students, English language learners, and students with disabilities whose lagging achievement had previously been hidden (Haycock, 2007). It also has afforded leverage to educators who are working to close achievement gaps. In high schools, however, which get little attention (and even less funding) from NCLB, not much progress has been seen (Haycock, 2007). Results from state assessments and the National Assessment of Education Progress from 2003-2005 indicated 17 of 24 states showing improvement in reading, but only 13 of 20 states showing gap-closing for African American students, and 11 of 20 states showing the same for Latinos. In math, 20 of 23 states showed overall improvement, but only 12 of 20 showed the same for Latinos. In math, 20 of 23 states showed overall improvement, but only 12 of 20 showed African American/white gap-closing and only 10 of 20 states showed Latino/white gap-closing (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Growth Towards Closing the Learning Gap (Secondary Level), 2003-2005

	% for all groups tested	African American	Hispanic
Reading - states tested	71%	65%	55%
Math –for states tested	87%	60%	50%

On the contrary, “improved achievement and narrowing gaps on state tests in the elementary grades are being seen; this is where most of the energy and resources provided through NCLB’s Title I are focused. In the middle grades, on the other hand, the picture on state assessments is mixed” (Haycock, 2007). Consequently, as a whole, students in Special Education show little growth towards closing their learning (academic performance) gap.

Pro Rebuttal

In regards to over-identifying a certain group of students for Special Education, the “Pro” statistics cited from the 2006 California Department of Education’s report for 2004-05 showed that Native Americans (11 %) and African-Americans (15.4%), together with Hispanics (9.8%), Filipino (5%), Asian (5.2%), and Pacific Islander (7.6%) were receiving Special Education services. Thus, if minority students are considered to be all racial/ethnic groups except for whites (non-Hispanic), the statistics prove that all minorities, together, were being identified more than whites (11.3%) for Special Education services. Both sides of the debate, comparing distinctive years, listed drastically different statistics for dropout rates. Students with and without disabilities are dropping out of school at an alarming rate (Kemp, 2007). However, the precise extent of the problem remains elusive because individual schools, school districts, and state departments of education often use different definitional criteria and calculation methods (Kemp, 2007). “There are two commonly accepted calculation methods used for computing dropout rates. The event method measures the proportion of students who

drop out of school in a single year (i.e., "What percentage of students dropped out this year?"). It is the most liberal and, consequently, favored by school districts because it underestimates the true number of dropouts. The cohort method, or longitudinal approach, involves following a group of students who are expected to graduate together across the secondary school years (i.e., "What percentage of students entering the X grade in a certain school district drop out after Y years?"). It is the most conservative and, consequently, accurate method. School districts avoid using this method because it portrays an accurate but unfavorable dropout rate. There is a third method that is rarely used but nevertheless appears in the literature: status rate. It measures the proportion of students who have not completed high school and are not enrolled on a specific day" (Kemp, 2007). Therefore, secondary schools, school districts, and state departments of education need to reach consensus on a uniform method of reporting when a student has dropped out of school and how to calculate and report the dropout rate; a uniform system would allow for the true dropout rate to be calculated. Thus, both debate sides have good arguments, but without definitive methods being identified to determine data, either side could be right! Results of standardized test scores, when collectively compiled for all grade levels as the "Pro" side reported, might show evidence of proficiency for students with disabilities, but the overall patterns according to the study by Education Trust (Ed Trust), are fairly consistent. The Education Trust, established in 1990 by the American Association for Higher Education as a special project to encourage colleges and universities to support K-12 reform efforts and now, grown into an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to make schools and colleges work for all of the young people they serve, works hard to track achievement patterns both in the U.S. as a whole and in the individual states (Haycock, 2007). "The Ed Trust collects and analyzes results from state assessments and the various exams that make up the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The analysis of state assessment results from 2003-05 looked at states that had at least three years of consistent elementary assessments for which they had reported results for the different subgroups. Improved achievement and narrowing gaps on state tests in the elementary grades, where most of the energy and resources provided through No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) Title I are focused, were seen. However, in the middle grades, for reading, only 20 of 31 states showed overall improvement, 22 of 29 states showed gap closing for African-American students, and 17 of 29 showed gap closing for Latino students. In math, 29 of 31 states showed improvement, but only 18 of 29 showed gap closing for African American students and 17 of 29 showed gap closing for Latino students" (Haycock, 2007). In high schools, which receive less funding and less attention from NCLB, far less progress was seen, as stated in the earlier Con Argument (refer to Table 3 below).

Table 3. Growth towards closing the Learning Gap (Middle Grades), 2003-2005

	% for all groups tested	African American	Hispanic
Reading- states tested	65%	76%	57%
Math-for states tested	94%	62%	57%

Further, "patterns for NAEP scores are consistent with those for state assessments. The most stable of all the tests, reading and math scores at the elementary level, show strong improvements between 1999 and 2004. More important, record performance was shown for all groups of students and the smallest gaps were evidenced separating African American and Latino students from white students in U.S. history. In the middle grades, however, performance is up and gaps are narrowing in math, but reading is mostly flat. At the high school level, Ed Trust's analysis of NAEP data shows no real change" (Haycock, 2007). Therefore, only elementary students in Special Education seem to show significant growth towards closing their learning gap.

Con Rebuttal

When looking at the most current statistics for the dropout rate for California special education students, it would appear we as educators have made dismal progress.The opposing position has asserted that the high school dropout rate for special education students is still much higher than the regular education student population dropout rate; however, when the dropout rate for specific disabilities is analyzed, it becomes clear that emotionally and behaviorally disabled students have a 50% or higher dropout rate (What Do We Know, 2). Their statistics skew the data to show a much higher overall rate than most disabilities. We can say we have progress to make with these two disabilities, but that does not indicate a failure overall at reducing the dropout rate for special needs students in general. The same partial positive growth is seen in closing the achievement gap between regular education and special education students. We have gains to make in closing the gap for secondary students, but we are closing the gap for younger students, as seen in standardized testing. We are moving forward with the youngest students because that group tends to respond to interventions more rapidly than secondary students. For example, a brief issued in 2007 by the National Center for Educational Statistics states, "It has been shown that 17% of special education students across the later elementary grades receive special education services for only two years." The brief describes the longitudinal study of students beginning in 1997 whereby 43% of the group that received special education services in first grade, no longer received them by third grade. It can be assumed that students are exiting special education because the gap has closed between them and regular education students.

Conclusion

For the first aspect of the debate, the Pro side cited statistics from a 2006 California Department of Education report, which differed from the statistics cited from the 27th Annual Congressional report, used for the Con side of the debate. These two sources, although the percentages were different, proved that one certain subgroup of students seemed to be more readily identified for Special Education services than any other subgroup. African-Americans (black) seem more likely to be served under Part B of IDEA than any other racial/ethnic group, the latter of which would include whites. Both sides of the argument also agreed, even though actual statistics were dissimilar, that white students were more often identified than Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islander youth. To address the over-identification of students of color, both sides of the debate agreed that steps for correction need to be initiated. Youth require screening to identify those "at risk" for developing learning, behavioral, social, and/or emotional problems that impact school achievement. Next, implementation of research-based interventions is essential in the general education settings. For those students not responsive to the interventions, further comprehensive evaluations are necessary; the assessments need to identify reasons for poor receptiveness, to determine the possible presence of a disability, to establish the educational need, and to develop an appropriate individualized educational plan. Postulating a conclusion about the dropout rate for students with disabilities, compared to students without disabilities, was difficult. Both sides of the debate used statistical data published in the same year (2006), but the actual years for comparison were different (2002-03/2005-06). The Pro argument, using the State Department of Education report, found that the Special Education student was less likely to drop out than the average student with no disabilities. The Con argument, on the contrary, citing information from the 2006 Digest of Education Statistics and the 27th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, 2005, declared that students with disabilities were three times more likely to drop out than pupils included in the national high school dropout rate for all racial/ethnic groups together.

The debate team concluded that the three years between the cited statistics (2002-03/2005-06) could hardly have created an "about face" in the identified group. A uniform method of reporting when a student has dropped out of school and how to calculate and report the dropout rate would probably allow for the true dropout rate to be calculated. Discovered by both parties from researching this aspect of the debate, however, was the fact that dropping out of school is contingent on several variables not related to the disabilities of youth. Both debate sides ascertained that previous retention, amount of exposure to the general education curriculum (education in regular classrooms), socioeconomic situations, drug abuse, low parental involvement, cultural norms and values, academic failure, lack of involvement in school functions and extracurricular activities, and absenteeism affect the reasons for all students exiting school without a diploma. Lastly, the team determined that students in Special Education have demonstrated improvements in closing the learning (academic performance) gap. Improved achievement and narrowing gaps on state tests has been strongly evidenced in the elementary grades, with students in the middle grades showing slight improvements, mostly in math. High school youth have shown less growth in closing their academic performance (learning) gap. To continue the trend and improve achievement across the continuum, the debate team agrees that accountability needs to translate into long-term goals. According to Kati Haycock's article, No More Invisible Kids, several objectives would make a difference. "Secondary education needs more attention, allocation of more resources, and implementation of more effective strategies for improving and increasing graduation rates. The expansion of expertise and resources is necessary to focus on turning-around persistently low-performing schools. Recognizing growth in students' learning can help distinguish between schools whose students are working toward proficiency and schools whose students require more interventions. States need to ensure that students are taught real-world standards and teachers are provided stronger supports to teach and assist students in meeting those standards ; and finally, teacher quality must be improved, with provisions in tact for equal access to effective teachers" (Haycock, 2007).

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